

Understanding Dalit socio-cultural marginalisation and resistance through autobiographical texts

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Does autobiography amplify the individual's identity? Can autobiography only tell the past incidents? How does autobiography relate the author with the present context of a society? All these questions emphasize the important place of an autobiography, especially the marginalized autobiographical texts. The objective of an autobiography is to present the 'self'. It is a personal narrative, told by the self, focusing on individual's existence and identity. The author is the protagonist who talks about his or her own identity that is closely related to his caste, community and other social locations. This paper focuses on socio-cultural marginalization and resistance as we find narrated in two autobiographical texts ---- The *Prison We Broke* (2009) by Babytai Kamble and *Coming out as a Dalit* (2019) by Yashika Dutt. Both are autobiographies of Dalit women writers. These two Dalit women writers belong to two different generations of Dalit women history. Babytai Kamble was the main participator in the Ambedkarite movement, whereas Yashika Dutt ,is a journalist who writes on issues related with gender and identity. From childhood, Babytai faced so many hurdles in her village, and during the childhood of Yashika Dutt her family hid their caste identity to escape the problems that befall dalits.. There are several Dalit women writers who have expressed their voices of resistance through their autobiographies, Urmila Pawar's *Aidan* (Weave of My Life, 1988), Bama's *Karakku* and Kumud Pawde's *Antahasphot* (Thoughtful Outburst, 1981) being very notable among these.

The first generation of Dalit women's struggle was based on Ambedkarite movement. The first Dalit women writers of this generation are Shantabai Kamble, Babytai Kamble and Shantabai Dani. Along with Babasaheb Ambedkar's values, the women writers focused on education, poverty, humiliation, discrimination, labour practices and religious cultures

of their communities. Dalit women writers strongly condemned Hindu doctrines and patriarchal culture of their community. Caste subjugation and Dalit male patriarchy are the two factors against which Dalit women writers speak up in their works. . They also explored the myths and superstitions which fractured the society.

The second generation noted prominently the impact of urbanization and industrialization. Maya Pundit said to *The Indian Express*, 'The rural landscape was witnessing the disastrous impact of a green revolution that had forced thousands of landless labourers, mostly Dalit, to migrate to the cities in search of work (Pundit 11). The writers of this generation are Kumud Pawde, a Dalit activist, Jyoti Lanjewar, a Marathi Dalit poet and Urmila Pawar, a Dalit writer and activist whose autobiography, *The Weave of My Life* represents the political and cultural identity of Dalit middle class women. They wanted to reform rape laws and created political consciousness among marginalized women. They hinted significantly that the savarna feminist movement was basically related to gender equality which ignored the specific nature of the problems suffered by dalit women. Kumud Pawde has talked about the caste differences of educational and social institutions which show the cruel picture of the society. Urmila Pawar's autobiography, *Aidan* (The Weave of My Life) begins with the village but focuses on the urban oppression. The ways of subjugation of Dalits in villages and cities operate differently. In villages, there are no resources to create or build own self but in cities, Dalits can cut out the obscurity and fashion their own identities. Urmila Pawar's journey changed when she moved to the city and made herself a successful writer and an activist. Helene Cixous gave the term 'écriture feminine' in women's writing in the West. *Ecriture feminine* is a feminine style of writing, a language which enables free female voices. This term works especially for the marginalized women

writers who were voiceless before Ambedkar period of dalit activism. Dalit women writing became significant after the Ambedkarite movement. This movement still inspires the activists working in the field of unresolved issues of human dignity and emancipation. During 1990s, several Dalit women's organisations emerged such as, National Federation of Dalit Women, National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, Zubaan, All India Dalit Women's Forum and International Movement Against all forms of Discrimination and Racism. These organisations are working for the upliftment and rights of Dalit women.

It is rightly said that those who are born and brought up in misery, discrimination and adversity are like diamonds because they come out stronger through their books and activism and it especially applies to marginalised women writers who are marginalized by class, subjugated by imposed silence, tortured by male patriarchy or authority and discriminated against by gender. Dalit women writings give an in-depth view of their struggles. Women across the world, and mostly in rural India, have met challenges to get themselves educated and for a dalit woman it's doubly hard. Most dalit women converted to Buddhism during Dr. Ambedkar's call to abandon shackles of casteism in 1956. After that they have been awakened by their own identity and started to write.

The Prison We Broke is a highly readable literary text written by a Dalit activist, Babytai Kamble. It was originally written in Marathi language and translated by Maya Pandit into English. It should be called a 'socio-biography' rather than autobiography because Babytai Kamble's focus is more on her community's sufferings rather than her own individual suffering. There is a deep connection between a Dalit individual and his or her community. In an interview with Maya Pundit, Babytai Kamble says, 'The suffering of my community has always been more important than my own individual suffering. I have identified myself completely with my people. And therefore Jina Amucha (*The Prison We Broke*) was the autobiography of my entire community' (Pundit 11). The author here talks not only about the identity of an individual; rather she is portraying the real picture of the collective identity of the women's community she belongs to. She writes that as the Mahar community is 'other' for the Brahmins, so are the Mahar women 'other' for the Mahar men. The Dalit women are not

only hegemonized by Brahminical rules of domination, they are harassed by Dalit men too. Babytai has shown the real condition of dalit women in Maharashtra, the birth place of the writer, the hegemonic cultural formation in Dalit women's lives and how they suffer from the two fold patriarchy – gender and caste. The writer also articulates multi-layered violence suffered by dalit women through the hands of 'savarna' (Hindu caste) men and their own caste male patriarchy. Marginalised women, who are subjugated by both sides, that is, upper caste society and their own family members, get a richly literary portrayal in this book. The women have no identity in their own community; that is why the writer has given a voice to those women who can create their own literature. To increase marginalized women's writing, 'Zubaan' is a publishing house which publishes books on Feminism of all varieties.

The author Babytai Kamble was influenced much by Dr. Ambedkar's words and She started to write under his influence.. The author's writing became her best way to represent herself in front of her community as well as the whole Indian society. Babytai became the president of Mahtama Phule DnyanVikas Prasarak Sanstha. She also got a grant from the Maharashtra government to start an ashram for orphans from the backward castes. From the childhood days Babytai was listening to Ambedkar's speeches whenever she got the opportunity. The author's father was also an activist.

Babytai says that Dr. Ambedkar has become greater than the Almighty because he was the only one who fought for himself and his people. One of the main significant things was that Dr. Ambedkar always emphasized education for the dalits' emancipation from the age-old clutches of the Indian society. She says, 'Your real world is the world of the glorious sacrifice of Bhima. The real leader is known by his intense desire and power to transform everyone in his own image (Kamble 66).

Education is one of the biggest strengths of the marginalized people because it helps to build them intellectually and financially strong; but in some way or the other higher castes want to obstruct their path to get real education. They fear the prospect of universal social equality through education. Caste has played a significant role in everyone's life either he or she is a Brahmin or a dalit. Caste consciousness is always there. Caste is a socio-political condition which affects

a person's life on a day to day basis. Kamble said sarcastically that intellectuals and elites are educated, live in bungalows, their children are highly qualified and occupy high positions in the society, but the author questioned:

There are so many intellectuals today, millions of them crawling around. Why is it that none of them are able to provide leadership even to a small section? Everybody seems to be preoccupied only with one's own family, one's own family, one's own wealth (ibid 70).

Babytai has deep thought upon this thing because Baba Saheb always tried to save human values. He always emphasised human rights with human duties, but the elite never tried to make the marginalized lives develop along the path of equality. She also says that upper class people teach the lessons and incidents of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to their but never teach the values of Baba Saheb who fought for the marginalized people.

Babytai's work expresses an intimate knowledge about the life in a Maharwada. She has portrayed a very harsh picture of marginalized women who lived in Maharwada. She writes, 'The other world had bound us with the chains of slavery. A powered man always has desire to dominate, to emphasize himself upon her and remember her duty towards him. Young girls who marry, hardly they are eight or nine years old, but they do not get better treatment'(ibid:75).

The author has shared many incidents of suffering of Maharwada women who are helpless at their own home; no one is there who understands their sufferings and problems. One of the major incidents she has shared is that when the newly married woman got her menstrual period, the mother-in-law became so agitated agitate and had a close watch on her daughter-in-law and son. She stays awake the whole night because of fear if they will come together. A Mahar woman continued to give birth to children till her menopause. That's why the author has questioned women's motherhood. When a girl marries, she becomes a mother but at last what do they get? The condition of women becomes worse when they do not get the right food after pregnancy. A woman's stomach needs some right food after giving birth to a child but her family do not care about this because for them the women are to be slaved only. They are just treated like animals. The women go themselves to beg

in front of their neighbours and collect handfuls of grains. Women are kept in the home because it is a custom in that community. The author's mother also suffered from the same condition. She internalized what her husband instructed her. The author's mother says to the author that 'The world belongs to the man with money. Don't even be taken in by your father's lofty words. There's no merit, no sin. Its only money that matters' (ibid 90).

Babytai Kamble's views and perceptions about dalit Indian life have inter-textual resonances. Bajrang Bihari Tiwari has written '*Dalit Sahitya Vimarsh Mein Stree*' (Woman in Dalit Literary Discourse) in the Hindi monthly journal *Kathadesh* of January 2013. . Here, he opines that there is no difference between the condition of marginalized woman and elite woman . Both are subjugated by the male patriarchal society. The hypocrisy of Hinduism not only affects marginalized women but also those women who belong to upper castes. They are treated like objects. The noted Dalit Hindi author Omprakash Valmiki's '*Sadiyon Ka Santap*' (Pain of Centuries) , is a collection of poems where we find '*Jhaduwali*' (The Woman with the Broomstick). There is a woman who cleans garbage. She wakes up at 5 in the morning and takes a *jhadu* to clean the roads. Valmiki says angrily, "Jabtak Ramesari ke hath mein

Khadang-khadang ghisatti lauhgadi hai
Mere Desh ka Loktantra ek Gali hai."

(As long as Ramesari continues to pull a garbage car, my country's democracy will be sound like an abuse.) The author is against the orthodoxy of the education system because the children who belong to lower castes are treated like untouchables. The teacher allotted their seats near the door of the class from where they were unable to see anything. The upper caste children abused them. They said, 'these M ahar girls put on such air. They have even touched the taps. Now where should we drink water from? Stupid things...' These lines show that their parents had toxicated their children's minds and filled them with snobbish values. The people also teased Dr. Ambedkar and said '*That Ambedkar has educated himself off. That filthy Mahar, Ambedkar, eats dead animals but looks at the air he gives himself*' (ibid 101)

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak* is one of the texts which tell that marginalized one has no right to say anything and especially it is applies to women. Women internalize what they hear

and follow from their males. That's why they never go against the dominating society represented by their husbands or sons. But women writers like the author Babytai Kamble, who gave voice to themselves and their community, break this pattern and speak up through their writings. Thus they find a tool that they can use to show the pain of all women who suffer from the problems of denial of opportunities, silencing and marginalization.

Yashica Dutt's *Coming out as a Dalit* is a modern masterpiece in the genre of Dalit Autobiographies. It is a remark upon Dalit progressive ideas. She was brought up in a Dalit (Valmiki) family in Ajmer, Rajasthan. She is an Indian writer and New York-based journalist. She has written on different topics including fashion, gender, identity, caste and culture. She describes how she felt compelled to hide her caste all along and remained in fear of her identity being found out. She is terrified to allow herself to be known as a lower caste person, but after Rohith Vemula's suicide, everything changed in her life. She embraced her true identity to be a Dalit. There was education for women in her family. The author's mother wanted to be an IPS and her father had inspired her to choose the subjects of Humanities, instead of Science. The dream of author's mother was shattered when his husband or author's father became alcoholic. She was beaten by her husband and ostracized by her in-laws for being 'too concerned' regarding studies and making a career. The author's mother had a major impact on author's life. The mother had an independent mind; she worked as an NGO worker, educating sex workers about the awareness regarding HIV/AIDS. She wanted that her daughter would not to be bounded in caste and class barriers.

The issue of domestic violence is not limited to Dalit or other marginalized communities. It is relatively a general social issue that majority of women face. The economic vulnerability, dowry system, sexual orientation and patriarchal nature of men are main causes behind the domestic violence. The author has raised the issues of manual scavenging in the text. Still, it is the hardest reality that Dalit households clean 7.9 lakh public and private dry latrines. Dalit women remove human excreta with her naked hands and without safety protocols. In rural areas, Dalit women go door to door to collect human body waste. In one of the episodes of *Satyamev Jayate*, based on the manual scavengers, one realises how they still work

without getting safety equipments. Along with manual scavenging, Dalit women are sexually harassed by sanitary inspectors, contractors and other workers in the workplace. Chapter nine of this memoir has thrown light on Dalit legacy during pre-Independence and post-Independence times. In September 1873, Jyotirao Phule, the social reformer and thinker, had established *Satyashodhak Samaj* with the purpose to work toward establishment of an egalitarian society. He was against the Brahmanical education, governance and bureaucracy. Jyotirao Phule got the title 'Mahatma' from a social reformer, Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar. He fought for women's rights with Savitribai Phule. Savitribai Phule achieved formal education with Phule's help. She started to write books and poems and became the first Indian teacher recognized by the British government. She fought for the widows who were harassed in multiple ways for being widows, all in the name of rituals and customs. She started a centre for women who were forced to abandon their babies. Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule shaped modern Indian education because it was the key ladder to get away from social hurdles. Jyotirao Phule has written in his work *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) about the lack of education which was the reason why Dalits have been subjugated since ages. He appreciated Christian missionaries who started schools which were open for all castes. At first, he wanted to sort out gender problems because without establishing gender equality the oppression of dalits would continue. Along with education, Jyotirao Phule focused on the enrichment of agriculture and technology. He wanted to create new mechanical tools that would be used in the agricultural field. He also demanded from the British government that the government should create more benefits for the farmers because they paid high taxes. In late 1800s, Brahmo Samaj condemned caste system and gender inequality. It was strictly against the authority of the Vedas. It did not believe in reincarnation. It rejected Hindu rituals and worship of images of God. Brahmo Samaj was influenced by Islam and Christianity. It focused on the education of women and remarriage of widows. On the other hand, Arya Samaj was also a social reform movement to enhance the greatness of Hinduism. It promoted Hindu rituals.

Dalit movement is a sign of resistance. Before Independence, B.R. Ambedkar organized the first conference for the *Depressed Classes* (now known as

Dalits) to make them aware of their rights. It was proposed in the conference that public tanks should be open for use by the untouchables. The Mahad municipality's conference also passed the same thing, to open Chawdar tank for Dalits. Dalits were not able to use water of the tanks for fear of the upper castes. Mahad Satyagraha was a movement spearheaded by Ambedkar to get the untouchables' access to the water of public tanks.

The author writes in the memoir about the clashes of thinking between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Gandhi never opposed the Varna system (hierarchical caste system) but Ambedkar had known the cruel realities of caste system from experientially close quarters. Gandhi reminded Ambedkar that Congress spent lakhs of rupees out of sympathetic concern for the depressed classes whom he fondly called *harijans* or children of God. Ambedkar denied that Congress considered the issue of untouchability. Gandhi said that Ambedkar was going against the 'homeland' in not supporting Congress. Ambedkar replied, 'I have no homeland. No self-respecting Untouchable worth his name will be proud of this land (Dutt 113). Homeland is not just a place, it is an identity. Ambedkar demanded the separate electorate for the Depressed Classes, so that they would get equal political participation to exercise their own rights and assert their identity. Ambedkar refused the form of federal government that was proposed by Congress leaders.

Rohith Vemula, a Ph.D scholar of Hyderabad University had committed suicide in 2016. After knowing this incident, Yashica Dutt revealed her identity through writing her memoir, *Coming Out As Dalit*. In 2015, Rohith and other five students were suspended from the Hyderabad University after an altercation with ABVP (Akhi IBharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad) students there. After the suicide of Rohith Vemula, students of several universities protested against the ruling establishment. In return, The Ambedkarite Students' Association (ASA) and the Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students' Association (BAPSA) were media-presented as anti-nationals. Both associations are influenced by Ambedkar's ideology. Rohith was not a part of any of these associations, though he was deeply influenced by Ambedkar's ideology. He had attached himself with the Students Federation of India but later he left it after knowing the suicides of Dalit students.

The author graphically underlines with examples the fact that humiliation, rape, violence and kidnapping are the major issues in front of Dalit women, and these are aggravated by the apathy and oppression of the unfavourably biased police force. The Amnesty International reported in 2001 that police filed thirty percent false cases against dalits. It also found that lawyers got the bribes from the rapists to close the cases. An incident happened with a twenty-year old woman raped by two upper caste men in Bhiwani, Haryana. They were jailed but soon when they got released raped her again. It was their revenge for complaining about the incident. In another uncannily similar rape incident, a fourteen-year-old tribal girl had been raped by policemen in Haryana. The two men were jailed but soon after their release they raped that girl again. It was a barbaric revenge of the same old nature. In 1972 a fourteen-year-old tribal girl was raped by two policemen in Desaijanj police station in Maharashtra. In 1989, Suman Rani was raped by policemen in Haryana. Several tribal girls and women are sexually assaulted by police in Bastar. Whenever these women go to complain about the incident, policemen grope their breasts to check whether they are lactating or not. It is common to hear that policemen assault either Dalit women or upper-caste women. Judges are paid to announce the verdict against the victims. Mathura rape case went for the trial, Supreme Court told that that 'she was used to sex, she might have incited the cops to have intercourse with her' (ibid 144). People protested against the verdict of the Supreme Court. Rape cases of Dalit women are often taken without seriousness. Dalit women are even charged that they are sexually available for men consensually. In 2014, two Dalit cousins were hanged by upper caste rapists in Badayun, Uttar Pradesh. They gang-raped, murdered and hanged her. When victims' families went to file the report at the police station, the police to take the report in the case. After the protest by the villagers and post-mortem report, it was proved that they were gang raped. All these are known cases, whereas thousands of rape cases against women are never filed.

Dalit women's organisations challenge the failure of mainstream women's organisations to get justice against the cruelties which happen to Dalit women. All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM) organizes training sessions, seminars and workshops to spread awareness about their human rights. Dalit

Swabhiman MahilaYatra (Dalit Women's Assertion March) conducts campaign regarding mental health and self-care treatment of marginalized women. Drawing an analogy between the American marginalized women and Indian dalit wome, Yashika Dutt says that just as mainstream white feminism has never made a balanced equation with black women India's mainstream feminism never took a properly activist stance and action in favor of Dalit women. Dalit women are deeply inspired by black women. Both are lives of struggled signifying Dalit women have a long journey to go and a long battle to fight against the casteist minds of the Indian society. *Coming out as Dalit* is a memoir of the author's experiences, of what she felt in her family and during her studies. As we find in other dalit memoirs, the individual self and the suffering marginalized community their stories of pain simultaneously in this book. The author focuses on the place of Dalits in Indian society. The memoir makes the point very vividly that violence and humiliation are not the only forms of caste oppression. There are other insidious, but equally devastating, forms of abuse that caste imposes and causes on and for dalit women. By way of conclusion we can say that *The Prison We Broke* of Babytai Kamble and *Coming out as a Dalit* of Yashica Dutt, written at a significant temporal gap in the history of the struggle against caste prejudices and humiliations, are very important literary pieces of what we know as Dalit Autobiography. These memoirs of two individual selves have successfully tried to show the hegemonic cultural formations in marginalized women's lives, how they suffer from two-fold patriarchy of gender and caste, and how they resist and challenge the dominance of the privileged.

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